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A Lasting First Impression

Designed to reflect the quality of a Wesleyan education, the new Minor Myers, jr. Welcome Center gets a positive reception.

Story by AMELIA BENNER '09

Photos by MARC FEATHERLY



The facade of the Minor Myers, jr. Welcome Center (above) features round windows and arches mirroring those of Presser Hall, which stands across the street.

refined look to the building, and visitors can watch a slide show about the University on a flat-screen, LCD monitor. Outside, they can see current students passing in front of Evelyn Chapel and glimpse the tree-lined expanse of the Eckley Quad through the gateway in front of Presser Hall.

“I think it’s the warmest and most welcoming building we’ve built on campus over the past decade or so,” says Associate Vice President for Advancement Ben Rhodes ’69.

A portrait of the building’s namesake hangs in the lobby. Former University President Myers, book in hand, peers over the top of his glasses at prospective students, as if to ask his oft-quoted question: “What’s your passion?”

Dean of Admissions Tony Bankston ’91 is pleased with the opportunity to give visitors a favorable first impression of the University. “When we were still in Holmes Hall,” he says, “we might have wondered, ‘How different could a new building be?’ Now that we’re here, we see the difference.”

“All future alumni classes will remember coming to the Welcome Center the very first time they visited campus,” Rhodes says. “Instead of going to one office in one building, they’ll go to a place that’s just for them.”

For years, one of the first glimpses that prospective students got of Illinois Wesleyan was the institutional, grey-carpeted lobby of the Admissions offices in Holmes Hall. It was a tranquil but slightly impersonal setting — one that didn’t exactly bring the word “welcoming” to mind.

But now, future Titans will await their first campus tour in the high-ceilinged, light-filled atrium of the new Minor Myers, jr. Welcome Center, which opened its doors this fall. The serene colors and graceful lines of the walls and windows lend a

The building's student focus continues on the second floor, where the Hart Career Center has been relocated, with offices, a resource center and conference rooms where employers can hold interviews with students.

"By housing these two student-centered offices in the same building, we hope to convey the importance we place on serving our students' needs throughout their association with the University," says Illinois Wesleyan President Richard F. Wilson. "In effect, the building is dedicated to two key transitions in the life of a student."

Among the new facility's features is the Alumni Auditorium where Admissions and career counselors can give presentations to prospective or current students. (Each auditorium chair bears the nameplate of a notable Wesleyan graduate.) It's a significant improvement, says Bankston, from the days when tour guides led groups of 40 to 50 high school students and their families from Holmes Hall to The Ames Library's Beckman Auditorium for similar presentations.

Lacking a conference room in Holmes, the Admissions staff used to review stacks of student applications in Ames as well. Now they can use an ample room in the Welcome Center's lower level, which also includes areas for the office's student employees.

In spring 2007, workers broke ground for the \$6-million facility on the site of the former United Methodist Conference Center, next to the President's House. Planning for the center began soon after the death of Myers in July 2003, and was inspired not only as a way to honor the former president's "visionary leadership" but in response to assessments showing that "new construction would be a far better alternative to renovating the existing structure," says Wilson. The center also frees up needed space in Holmes Hall, which will continue to house most administrative functions.

Kent Wallace '62 and his wife, Sue, provided a \$500,000 challenge "to stimulate other alumni to express their respect and admiration for the late Minor Myers," says Rhodes, who adds that the new center has been entirely funded by alumni donations, leaving no burden of debt on the University.

One major fundraising effort was the Alumni Walk, a pathway of engraved bricks leading up to the door of the center. Each of the 1,023 brick bears the name of a Wesleyan graduate and his or her year of graduation. Any alumnus could sponsor a brick for himself, a friend or relative at a cost of \$250.

"We wanted our new students to know that the alumni built Illinois Wesleyan," Rhodes says.

The response to the call for bricks was, as Rhodes puts it, "overwhelming."

"Boom! We got sponsorships for a thousand bricks right away," he says. "We filled up all the space we had."



Trustee Emeritus Davis Merwin and his wife Sharon look at the portrait of Myers that hangs in the lobby.



The lobby of the new building features comfortable seating for visitors.

One of the University's priorities, says Bud Jorgenson, director of the University Physical Plant, was making the new building "look like it fit" with the rest of campus.

"Trying to get that 'traditional' look was very much a priority," he says, gesturing at the round windows that echo those of Presser Hall across the street.

Jorgenson was especially involved with efforts to earn Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for the building. Among other "green" elements, the new Welcome Center features a geothermal heating system, the latest in efficient fluorescent lighting and a traction elevator with a small motor instead of a hydraulic pump.

The mechanical room in the bowels of the building is noticeably less crowded with pipes and equipment than one would expect. "The size of the room was set before we decided to go with the geothermal system," Jorgenson says, pointing out the futuristic-looking reclamation unit that helps reduce heat loss in the building and the computer that operates the elevator. "This takes up considerably less space than a

conventional heating system."

Jorgenson estimates that the University will save 35 to 50 percent on energy costs for the building due to the geothermal system — although, he adds, it will probably take about seven years to recoup the cost of the equipment and break even. But it's an investment that is well worth it, Jorgenson says, as he shows off one of the 18 small, quiet heat pumps that circulate the earth's heat throughout the building.

The sustainability efforts have caused the building's new residents "to rethink the little things we do," Bankston says, adding that the Admissions Department purchased hundreds of reusable ceramic mugs to replace the Styrofoam cups they once used to serve coffee. "That seems like such a small detail, but it means something to students. It shows that we're committed to sustainability."

Career Center Director Warren Kistner calls it “a dramatic move” and it’s hard to disagree. Once occupying the dimly-lit, low-ceilinged basement of Gulick Hall, the Hart Career Center’s new home on the Welcome Center’s second floor is a spacious, comfortable and highly functional space.

“One of the issues we had in the past was visibility for students,” he says, “and the issue of what we were presenting to employers, graduate school representatives and guests.”

Now, the center — named after former Board of Trustees Chair Craig Hart — has plenty of space for their library of job-search materials, as well as conference rooms where students can practice their interview skills and meet prospective employers.

Kistner hopes the new facility will help his staff drive home the point that “career development is a four-year process and beyond.”

“I think that was something that was missing before,” he says. “Now, prospective students will come in and the seed will be planted that this office is here and is something they should use.”

Bankston says that he’s heard “a lot of positive reaction” to the facility from visitors. “We want them to come into an inviting area that gives them an idea of the history and culture of the institution,” he says.

Rhodes says that alumni who have seen the finished building “all love it.”

“They love the building and they love the setting,” he says. “It’s a cozy, welcoming, warm environment — just like Illinois Wesleyan.”



Hart Career Center worker Heidi Adams '09 films Amanda Pilgrim '10 using video equipment that helps students prepare for job and internship interviews.